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Himadri Lahiri. Asia Travels: Pan-Asian Cultural Discourses and Diasporic Asian Literature/s in English. Bolpur: Birutjatio Sahitya Sammiloni, 2021. i-xxiii + 270 pp. ISBN 978-81-953067-8-7

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Reading a book in an emerging field caters to our curiosity and that by an eminent academician expands the horizon of our knowledge. Both these sayings are true of the book under review, Himadri Lahiri's *Asia Travels: Pan-Asian Cultural Discourses and Diasporic Asian Literature/s in English*. With a 'Foreword' by Nilufer E. Bharucha, the book has three Sections, each having four Chapters. In addition, there are five 'book reviews' in the Appendix which add flavour to the topic in question.

The highly informative 'Introduction' makes it clear that the book is about transnational travels which helps one discover the limitations of singularistic identity and sensitizes one to the need to go beyond the national identity when taken parochially. At the outset the author dwells upon the history of the emergence of the geo-cultural concept 'Pan-Asianism' – a term used to describe a number of Asian countries which, despite their differences and rivalries, are envisaged as a single space. What binds the different political states of the space popularly known as South East Asia is a shared commonness – anti-Westernism and recognition of the value of cultural heterogeneity due to the presence of Confucianian, Vedic, Buddhist and Islamic ideas. The author traces it to the Japanese victory in Russo-Japanese war in 1905, Sun Yat-sen's multicultural Asianist vision, the Pan-Asianist discourses of Okakura Tenshin and Rabindranath Tagore and to Sister Nivedita's projection of India 'as a metaphysical and spiritual idea rather than a territorial and political entity' (xii). While this Pan-Asianism ran the risk of Asia-centricity which is the other side of Euro-centricity, the author shows that in the post-Civil rights era, the intermixing of races, the formation of Asian Diaspora augmented by large scale migration from Asia, and the prevalence of the spirit of multiculturalism in Europe and America have created a more liberal sense of solidarity of the Asians in the West. Lahiri has made elaborate study of the works of different authors of Asian origin in search of reflection of Pan-Asianism in their literary conscious. In range and depth the study is literally astounding and the authors selected for study are well-known in their own countries as well as outside their national territory. Some like Tagore are world famous; a few may be less known to general readers but certainly are familiar faces to readers interested in Asianist culture.

In Chapter One of the First Section ('From Home to the World: Pan Asianism and

Diaspora') the author uses 'cultural lens' to search the prospects of Pan-Asianism. He mentions the 'politics of earth labelling' and 'intra-' as well as 'inter-' 'national conflicts' – be it the Civil War in Sri Lanka, the Chinese occupation of Tibet, the partition of India or the Sino-Japanese conflict – which have often ruptured the cultural affinities of the countries located in East Asia. Yet the presence of English as a unifying language, the publication of collaborative literary anthologies figuring authors from different South East Asian countries, the shared historical experience of being colonized by the West, trans-cultural cooperation in South East Asia, especially the activities of Lahore based SATCO which took initiative in organizing performance of plays with 'multi-national cast, and, to cap them all, the political coalition of Asians in the Western diaspora have collectively contributed to the formation of Pan-Asian fraternal space. In this context the author has justly pointed out the significance of reading literary output of neighbouring countries which is a kind of symbolic 'cultural travel and cultural mapping that is free of hegemonic trappings' (11). The author has studied two stories – Tagore's 'Kabuliawala' and Mahadevi Verma's 'Chini Feriwala' – to establish how a so-called 'foreigner' becomes one's own man and how, at moments of 'humanitarian crisis' (20), cultural divergences wither away, paving the way for the emergence of familial bond, filial or fraternal.The next Chapter explores the mission of Tagore, 'a cultural ambassador', in strengthening the cultural solidarity which is a way of resisting Western imperialistic strategy of 'divide and rule'. The author makes an in-depth study of Tagore's 'Letters from Java' where Tagore speaks of traces of Indian national consciousness' in Bali and Java and then analyses why he faced a rather cold reception when he visited China in 1924 and, going against Western materialist culture, encouraged the Chinese youth to feel the importance of rescuing 'the human soul from the grip of greed which keeps it chained' (39). Chapter Three elaborately discusses the conditions leading to the birth of brand Asian-American literature in the post-Civil Rights movement era – a condition marked by resistance of White hegemonic culture which indirectly nurtured the consolidation of the comradeship among the Asians in the USA. The essay makes a scholarly analysis of the various nuances of the term 'Asian-American' which apparently may strike as an essentialist label hiding the differences of American immigrants of Asian origin but which actually is an attempt to redress the marginalizing monoculturalist attitude of the White Americans by bringing into visibility the literature of the ethnic groups hailing from Asia. The author is conscious of the problems of racial and ethnic categorization which on the one hand erases the particularities of different ethnic groups, on the other calls for further sub-divisions. Yet the rubric 'Pan-Asian' is handy, not only because it reveals the 'asymmetrical relationships operative in American power structure' (50) but also because the formation has a back-up of togetherness that makes it a meaningful label. The last Chapter of the Section theorizes about the formation of Diaspora due to displacement and relocation which opens up the possibility of cultural negotiation in the hostland. An academician long engaged in Diaspora studies, Lahiri here relates Pan-Asianism to Diaspora wisely touching upon the link between travels and enrootment. He interrogates the view of diasporic subject as an 'ever-floating individual' and argues that although the diasporic condition is extremely 'volatile' (58) because it implies crossing of borders, sprouting of the scattered seeds, that is 'community formation on the basis of common origin or interests' (60) – or to put it differently, 'transportation of cultures across continents and transplantation of the same in the new soil' (60) must be admitted as the hallmark of Diaspora. True, the identity gets hybridized in the process, but this hybridity is also a precondition for the availability of 'plurality and simultaneity of points of view' (61). The diasporic space is of immense importance especially in the context of Pan-Asianism

because it dismantles nationalist walls and 'envisages an alliance of the marginals' (63).

Such insights lie scattered all over the other two main Sections of the book. The Second Section, appropriately named 'Shadows in the Nations: Diasporic Perspectives', analyzes a number of texts that expose the fissures in the solidarity. Chapter Five, the first of the Section, is a study of Japanese author Monica Sone's autobiographical narrative *Nisei Daughter* and Hisaye Yammamoto's fiction 'The Legend of Miss Sasagawara'. It explains how historical events like the bombing of Pearl Harbour during WW II, led to racial profiling of the Japanese and their internment, which impacted the life of even second/ third generation of Japanese born in America and having nothing to do with the 'Land of Rising Sun'. This injustice inspired a feeling in other ethnic communities of Asian descent that they too were victims of discrimination and thus fostered Pan-Asianism. Chapter Six zooms on Ranbir Sidhu's 'Border Songs' and Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy Man* – two classic partition tales. Incidentally, communal atrocity ripped through the Indian subcontinent in the wake of the Partition and creation of two states, Pakistan and India, at the end of colonial rule in 1947. One may at first be surprised why Partition stories should be included in a book on Pan-Asianism, because these stories by exposing the enmity and rivalry of the new-born twin states are likely to jerk the issue of solidarity signified by Pan-Asianism. But the inclusion is justified. Outwardly it is because of the absence of communal wall in day to day life, as exemplified by the fact that the suitors of Ayah in Sidhwa's tale belong to different religions – Hindu, Muslim, Sikh. But more plausibly it is due to the presence of the element of travelling, the mass exodus of Hindus from Pakistan and of Muslims from India. But most appropriately, it is because the same destiny of victimhood marks the people cutting across religious and national identities and stresses their akin-ness at the deep structure level. The perspective broadens in the last two Chapters of the Section as Lahiri proceeds to examine representative texts produced in Afghanistan and the Himalayan countries. Chapter Seven sheds light on the glorious cultural past of Afghanistan and through a perceptive reading of Hosseini's novel *The Kite Runner*, shows how internal turmoil and repressive forces stand in the way of achieving transnational broadness. The main focus of Chapter Eight is on Tibet which holds a unique position in the Pan-Asian cultural context. First, national identity which is secular is indistinguishable from religious identity of the Tibetans who are Buddhist by faith. Secondly, the main Tibetan Diaspora is in India where many Tibetans found their refuge when they fled their country under the leadership of Dalai Lama in 1950. Here also is a case of Asia *travelling* and from an alien soil nostalgically dreaming of *homecoming* when red guns will no longer boom in the silent hills.

The Third Section entitled 'Settling Down: Response of the Authors in Diaspora' (which appears in Contents as 'Settling Down in the Diaspora') analyses the works of writers who have not only crossed the borders but also found moorings in a new cultural milieu. Chapter Nine, the first of the Section probes the struggle for selfhood as revealed in the 'mother-daughter dyad' (145) in the novels of two Chinese American women writers – Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston. Lahiri shows that while mothers in 'ethnic sub-society' find it hard to part with the cultural baggage, the daughters born and brought up in America resent imposition of code of ancestral culture but cannot altogether resist it. This brings out the diasporic paradox of being simultaneously connected and delinked as evident from a line quoted from a story by Amy Tan: 'I talked to her in English, she answered back in Chinese' (155). Although using different tongues, both of them can follow each other's language, or else all communication would have broken down. Chapter Ten studies Bharati Mukherjee's novels like *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Jasmine* to unfold the problematic of staying connected

to distant culture in the fluid diasporic environment where one has to struggle hard to balance 'here' with 'there', 'now' with 'then' in defining one's identity. If Tara finds it difficult to ward off the country of her past from her expatriate sensibility, and like Bharati's own sister Mira, chooses to live in America 'to maintain an identity, not to transform it' (167), Jyoti in *Jasmine* has no scruple to adopt a new name (Jasmine) which suggests that re-configuring of identity in the process of integration and acclimatization is inevitable for many Asian-Americans of second/third generation. Chapter Eleven concentrates on the stories of Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* to find out how Asian American family-space is impacted by migration and cultural interaction consequent upon such travels. The last Chapter of the Section is a summing up of the conclusions drawn in previous chapters and also a re-examination of them in the present context. Lahiri justly contends that while terms like 'South Asian American' or 'Asian American' 'tend to homogenise or essentialise heterogeneous groups' (201), these are products of history of ethnic communities trying to resist Western cultural hegemony and discriminatory culture. In a world devastated by Covid 19, mankind should accentuate cosmopolitanism and the need for crossing borders. The author thinks that 'the urgency for building up pan-Asian platforms' has been on the wane in the present context of increasing empowerment of the ethnic groups as evident from the career of Kamala Harris who is the current Vice-President of the USA. Still, Lahiri's book helps us recognize the value of 'plural sigularity' (202) which is a precondition for imbibing a global vision. Lahiri pertinently refers to Bharati Mukherjee's idea of interculturalism as the basis of true multiculturalism. The sooner we understand this, the better.

The title has a bearing on all the essays which fall under two broad categories – Pan-Asianism and South Asian Diaspora. It is 'Travel' that is the link word between the two concepts – 'Pan-Asianism' and 'South Asian' Diaspora. A sense of kinship with counterparts inhabiting a space split by borderline is the essence of Pan-Asianism – a feeling necessitating crossing many symbolic walls which enclose us in narrow cocoons of identity and also isolate us from humanity at large. Similarly, Diaspora implies negotiation of cultures which is not possible unless one steps out and grows conscious of the non-sustainability of all fences. Although most Chapters of the book were published as articles in different journals, the book is not just an anthology of critical essays, not only because these have been structured with meticulous care but also because there is a single critical focus. The style is lucid and the vocabulary is not jargon-ridden, although it has the critical fibre expected from high standard academic publication. The printing is decent enough and there is almost no typo, something one rarely comes across in products of not-so-well-known publishing houses. In short, the book is assuredly an enviable collection-piece of scholars.

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